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ABSTRACT

This brief essay explores the possible educational uses of cable television, and discusses how teachers can become involved in developing educational programs for cable. The paper begins by presenting practical steps that need to be taken if educational requirements are to be met in the highly commercial environment of cable television, and suggests ways for teachers to find production facilities. The publicizing of programs is then considered, followed by a discussion of the potential role of interactive television in education. The paper concludes by discussing the importance of follow-up and support services. (EW)

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INVOLVEMENT IN CABLE:

PRACTICAL APSECTS FOR EDUCATIONAL USERS

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INVOLVEMENT IN CABLE:
PRACTICAL ASPECTS FOR EDUCATIONAL USERS

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The need for caution

At first sight, cable offers exciting prospects to teachers, particularly in adult education: new courses, new students, and new ways of teaching. However, no extra money is going into education for new services; educational institutions therefore need to be sure that any new enterprise will make more effective use of existing resources. Does cable provide such possibilities?

I want to be positive. Education needs new initiatives, desperately. There has been a lot of rhetoric from government sources about the educational potential of cable, and in fact I share their belief in this potential. But with the best will in the world, it is hard to see how, under present circumstances, teachers could be justified in making major investments of time and effort in education by cable. Education is being used to give moral justification to what is clearly a commercial operation.

I have no ideological objection to commercial activities, but I am concerned with how people can benefit from education, and the conditions that are necessary for effective education to take place. I want then to discuss briefly some of the practical steps that will need to be taken, in the highly commercial environment of cable, if educational requirements are to be met.

Programming

Who will provide the programmes for education on cable? Cable operators are unlikely to have their own production facilities suitable or available for educational use, nor are they likely to pay for educational programmes to be made, since they could not recover their costs. I'll discuss a national networked educational channel in a moment, but for most institutions, it will mean making their own programmes. There are many colleges and even schools with adequate production facilities, and skilled staff to make programmes for cable distribution. If you don't have your own facilities, it should not be difficult to find a local educational institution that does. The Educational Television Association publishes a directory of members, with details of production facilities. Given the amount of spare capacity in educational television production, any institution without facilities would be mad to buy equipment and hire staff just to make programmes for cable.

However, even for institutions with their own facilities, there will be costs in producing for cable. 'Real' cash will be required for graphics, tape, travel. Costs can vary from £400 to £6000 for a single programme. More important, though, is the cost in time of lecturers, programme planners and other contributors. One programme is likely to require at least one day's work from a lecturer, and much more for most projects. So while cable need not cost so much as even non-broadcast video production, it is still not cheap, in terms of cost per student study-hour.

What about using existing material? Colleges with their own libraries of self-produced materials can use this provided no fees or royalties were paid for the original production. However, we shall see that transmitting such material on cable unmodified or without support is likely to be most ineffective. If you want to use material made by commercial producers or broadcasting organisations on cable, you have major problems. Very short extracts may be shown, but otherwise copyright clearance and royalty payments will be necessary. These can be very high. For instance, at the Open University about 80 per cent of our programmes need royalties to be paid for each showing. The performing unions, such as Equity, have made no agreements yet about replay rights on cable. We estimate at the OU that for some programmes, royalties will be anything from £200 to £500 per showing on cable - and that's without any fee to the OU. We are almost certain to require a fee on top of royalties. Buying a video cassette programme from BBC Enterprises (at over £200) won't help. You still can't show it on cable. Advice then to any educational institution wanting to use previously existing material on cable: get the cable operator to clear the rights and pay royalties - and watch the small print in any contract you sign to ensure that you are not liable.

What might an educational cable programme look like? Knowledge Network, in Canada, produces 1½ hour programmes, say on forest fire prevention for voluntary firemen, with perhaps 10 minutes of a lecturer talking to the camera, followed by a public service film of fire-fighting (no royalties there!), followed by a studio discussion of the film with three experts. Viewers may then be asked to write a short essay on fire prevention, at which point the programme would stop, and another programme or lecture would take over. One hour later, the programme would recommence. Viewers may telephone in, and read parts of their essays, which would be commented on by the studio panel, and in a similar way viewers could ring in with questions.

But note some of the requirements of this programme. It needs to be well publicised in advance, to reach the target group. It needs a lot of time, at a peak time. It still costs money to put on - the film had to be paid for, as did guest contributors, and the production facilities. This programme - as are all the others on Knowledge Network - is paid for by the Provincial Ministry of Education, and the cable station must carry Knowledge Network programmes by regulation.

Publicity

It is not enough though just to make programmes and send them out into the wide blue yonder. There has to be an audience at the end of the transmission. Teachers need to be realistic about the odds of anyone in their target audience switching on by chance to the right channel at the right time to catch their programme. For instance, in a population of 50,000 there are likely to be only 100 Open University students, who between them could be studying any one of 150 courses!

Of 50,000 subscribers then, how many will be watching your programme on cable, and of those, how many are likely to be relatively interested, unless the programme has already been publicised?

Interaction

The Government has made a lot of the interactive possibilities of cable for education. Probably more nonsense has been spoken about this than any other. What does interaction mean on cable? This will depend very much on the bandwidth of the return signal from the viewers' end. If the bandwidth allows only for keyed responses - like multiple-choice options, or computer keyboard responses - then forget it as a teaching tool. If there are large numbers of viewers, the studio lecture can only respond to aggregate responses. If there are small numbers viewing, they might as well use the telephone. Keyed responses could be used though for enrolments for fee-paying for courses advertised on cable - but this service could be provided just as well on Prestel. Keyed responses give a very limited range of response or interactivity for viewers, particularly in 'real-time' broadcasts. Dial-access, which would allow subscribers to dial up certain programmes stored on tape or disc, would make keyed responses more valuable, but such a system would be extremely expensive to set up, since not only would a large range of programmes have to be made, but an extensive computer programming facility would have to be provided.

Two-way broadband capability would allow viewers on each site to see each other. This however is likely to be very expensive to provide, and actually unnecessary for home learners. The main value of two-way video is for teaching across different sites or institutions. Again, though, large numbers of students will be required at each end to justify the cost, and this will inevitably restrict the scope for person-to-person interaction. Most studies of two-way video interaction suggest that the advantages are minimal over one-way video and two-way audio via telephone, and the latter is many times cheaper.

Follow-up

The same rules apply to cable as to off-air educational programmes: continuous, uninterruptable programmes are a weak instructional medium. It is very difficult to learn from television alone. Support services, support materials, and a structured course are essential if skills are to be learned, or understanding achieved. The costs of providing these are likely to far exceed the cost of producing cable programmes. Television is valuable for raising awareness, recruitment and motivation but very poor at instruction. So having gone to the trouble of making programmes, the job is still less than half done!

This is why I am very sceptical about the value of nationally networked educational programmes such as that proposed by Wyvern. Who will provide the local support and back-up necessary for such programmes to be effective? If it is to be educational institutions, they will want some say in the choice of programming. The advantages of cable to educational institutions are by no means apparent. Nor are the advantages to cable operators of showing educational programmes much more apparent. Without regulation and external funding, cable seems a bad deal for education. It is too much effort to produce, at too high a cost, for too few students, and likely to be too ineffective even for those it does reach. While I wish South Bank Polytechnic and other institutions wishing to take the plunge every success, under present conditions cable is more likely to be a nightmare for education than the dream that Robin Stenham is trying to realise.